

“The Chronicle Series”

Congleton Chronicle – Alsager Chronicle - Biddulph Chronicle – Sandbach Chronicle

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Congleton
CW12 1BW.
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Ipsos Annual report

Introduction

We are family-owned paid-for weekly whose titles date back to 1893. In an earlier form we go back further and a similar business has operated from our address for at least 250 years.

We publish four titles. The *Congleton Chronicle* is our flagship title, brings in most revenue and has the most sales (10,000 of our total 15,000, but see below). We also publish the *Biddulph Chronicle*, *Sandbach Chronicle* (est 1944) and the *Alsager Chronicle* (launched two or three years ago).

We are not members of ABC and use modelled data based on our print run for circulation: 25 years ago circulation was 16,500, now it is 15,000. This is a drop of 10% over 25 years, mainly due to outlets closing. As with most weeklies, our audience is everyone.

We are a traditional paper in many ways but try to be outspoken and act as a voice for the community. We have a strong op-ed section, including editorial, letters from readers, and a column called Open Debate, where people can sound off at more length than a letter, not that we limit letters. We also have an outspoken columnist called Mr Grumpy and another, less regular one, called Simple Soul.

Standards

Our minimum standard is the editor's code of conduct. We also adhere to the US Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics. (See attached).

All our stories are verified. We speak to both sides of any story. The only times this fails is with new trainees, when they are learning on the job. All stories are checked on the page by the editor or his deputy, and any stories that do not appear fair are pulled from that page, though this is rare. The week this report was being written, we pulled a court story (drink driving) from the front page of an edition, as it seemed unfair to single out one drink driver from the many we report.

Complaints

In theory we have a formal complaints procedure, in practice it is rarely used. We are accessible to readers, particularly via social media where our editor has his own page, and most readers communicate via email. Most of our staff live in the area. We have amicable relationships with local groups and societies.

Internally, we only employ six reporters and three subs; we talk all the time so we don't have need of "a system".

Complaints arrive in a variety of ways: social media, the telephone, email, being stopped in the street, having your ear bent in the pub. Any that concern factual errors or "proper" errors are recorded and investigated.

The most common complaint is probably about addresses given in court, saying Defendant X does not live at that address and is unknown by anyone there. People are usually being economical with the truth. (How are court documents served if the address is not correct?). We refer them to the court clerk, police or their solicitor.

It is worth pointing out, in this era of strict regulation, that it is not always newspapers in the wrong. This year we had one complainant who was so incensed that on two occasions he threatened our staff and on the second occasion, police had to be called. This was for a court address that we reported correctly and the court confirmed was the address given in court.

Complaints where we have actually made a factual error, or error of judgement that warrants an apology, are logged. We investigate the causes and if appropriate, issue a clarification / apology / correction, depending on the circumstance. If the error is more than a simple mistake we will consult the staff member who is responsible, to avoid the mistake happening again.

Complaints are channelled according to their seriousness. Most are dealt with by the reporters and more serious ones by our deputy editor. He may consult the editor.

As the old saying has it: "The man who never made a mistake never made anything" so mistakes go with the job. We have no problem printing corrections and apologies. We see apologies as a way of maintaining our standing in the community, and not as something to hide. If we make a mistake, we admit to it and people appreciate this.

Positioning of corrections

All corrections go on the letters page. We have noted Ipso rulings on letters pages, but our letters pages are the best read part of the paper, so we are in no sense "burying" corrections. We have five or six pages of letters every week.

After speaking to Ipso, we now run a corrections panel in the same position in the letters section, whether or not we have any corrections to make. We do not use page templates or run identical lay-outs each week so it is hard to run the corrections section on the same page each week.

If the complaint was about a front page story (or back page – we have news not sport on the back) the correction would go there if we/the complainant felt this was necessary. We have a weekly panel that gives people various information, including how to complain. It must be said that few people take any notice, and contact us in the ways described above.

Traceability

We have noted recent Ipso rulings. Our website is behind a paywall, so no stories go on the web that have not been in the paper.

We use Facebook/Twitter as de facto websites, and post extracts of stories (usually the first two pars).

All hard news stories that go on Facebook are subbed and have been in the paper.

What's on type events and community news go on social media before being in the paper but we have full traceability (see below).

Court stories that are generated from court lists generally go on Facebook before going into print. These are written in full, and not reduced. We get occasional complaints but these are usually useful in tailoring stories before they go to press. For example, we are now more conscious that in domestic violence cases, while the home address might be given in court the defendant might be prohibited from attending that address by his/her bail conditions.

We are a training ground for reporters so our IT was designed with this in mind. We keep copies of all stories in the raw and subbed forms. This was to allow reporters to access copies of their original stories and subbed stories for their logbooks but – handily – it means we have copies of everything as it goes into the system. We keep copies of all stories in the original form they were emailed to us, copies of them after pre-subbing processing has occurred and of course copies of the final stories. Anything posted on social media will have its source saved.

Training/general comments

None of this conveys how we actually operate - we are a community newspaper that the community feels it owns and controls. Most "complaints" are not actually complaints but friendly emails or requests for a follow-up. Even people whom we don't know, know that we will correct mistakes, so it's more a dialogue than a complaints procedure.

We have not been reported to Ipso this year but it is worth nothing that the one time we were referred to Ipso was by a person who was concerned that we were influenced by a third party. It wasn't the complaint that sent him to Ipso but a mistaken belief that a third party had influenced (or even written) the story he complained about. Part of the informal resolution was to reassure him that this was not the case. Had he not laboured under that misapprehension, he would not have contacted Ipso over what was essentially a careless error.

We routinely apologise for errors that have been made in the submitted copy, ie it is the sender's fault. If it is a bad error, we will say it was in the information given to us but usually we just print a correction – we don't want our correspondents to look silly so we take the blame. This is always the case in errors in funeral reports; the last thing a bereaved family wants is a squabble as to who made the mistake.

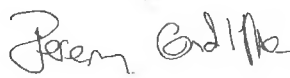
We also print (in the spirit of the SPJ) an occasional column that lists all errors and tries to explain why they happened, and occasional editorials will address complaints. In most cases, we know the people who have complained and are still in regular contact with them. The most recent is attached.

As for training: we take on trainees who leave once they have passed the NCE. We do not have a separate training system for mistakes – training is an integral part of our system.

Contacting Ipso

We are aware that Ipso offers pre-publication advice but our corrections are the result of mistakes, whether it be a sub's wrong headline or a reporter's mis-reading of a story. We work on the principle of "If in doubt, leave it out" so it is hard to see under what circumstances we would consult with Ipso prior to publication – it would have to be a story we had doubts about in the first place.

Ipso has raised the issue of how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made. The answer is: no differently to how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made by a reader. We answer to our readers and we do not treat reader complaints less seriously because Ipso is not involved. An example was a complaint about a wrong (badly wrong) heading over a court report (see the round-up of errors). We dealt with this in the same way as if the complainant had gone to Ipso, and it's hard to see how a negative Ipso ruling could have made any difference to our reaction.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeremy Condliffe".

Jeremy Condliffe

Editor/MD/responsible person

Attached:

1. SPJ Guidelines
2. A recent corrections round-up
3. Editorial addressing court complaints

CODE of ETHICS

PREAMBLE

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.

The Society declares these four principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media.

SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT

Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.
- ▶ Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.
- ▶ Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.
- ▶ Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.
- ▶ Be cautious when making promises, but keep the promises they make.
- ▶ Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.
- ▶ Consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.
- ▶ Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.
- ▶ Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- ▶ Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.
- ▶ Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- ▶ Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.
- ▶ Provide access to source material when it is relevant and appropriate.
- ▶ Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.
- ▶ Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.
- ▶ Label advocacy and commentary.
- ▶ Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information. Clearly label illustrations and re-enactments.
- ▶ Never plagiarize. Always attribute.

MINIMIZE HARM

Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.

- ▶ Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.
- ▶ Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.
- ▶ Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Weigh the consequences of publishing or broadcasting personal information.
- ▶ Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.
- ▶ Balance a suspect's right to a fair trial with the public's right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.
- ▶ Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- ▶ Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
- ▶ Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news. Identify content provided by outside sources, whether paid or not.
- ▶ Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.
- ▶ Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content.

BE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.
- ▶ Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.
- ▶ Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.
- ▶ Expose unethical conduct in journalism, including within their organizations.
- ▶ Abide by the same high standards they expect of others.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is a statement of abiding principles supported by additional explanations and position papers (at spj.org) that address changing journalistic practices. It is not a set of rules, rather a guide that encourages all who engage in journalism to take responsibility for the information they provide, regardless of medium. The code should be read as a whole; individual principles should not be taken out of context. It is not, nor can it be under the First Amendment, legally enforceable.

CONTACT THE SOCIETY

For more information on the Society of Professional Journalists or for more on journalism ethics, visit SPJ's website at spj.org or contact SPJ at:

Society of Professional Journalists • Eugene S. Pulliam National Journalism Center
3909 N. Meridian St. • Indianapolis, IN 46208-4011
317.927.8000 • spj@spj.org (email) • spj.org (Web)

Improving & Protecting Journalism



Congleton Chronicle report – attachment 2

Corrections column, Jan 2016.

They say a week is a long time in politics, but it's a long time in the world of corrections, too. We were going to run our summary and explanation of mistakes before Christmas, but we had made so few it wasn't worth it. What a difference a couple of weeks makes...

COURT: we are now emailed the results of the various magistrates' courts covering our patch, so — in theory — we now have as fair a system as we've had for a few years, because everyone goes in. Those who complain that we are sinking to a new low when we print their court case should remember that 50 or 100 years ago, courts were held in the various towns we covered and we would report all wrong-doers as they appeared. At one time the Congleton court was in the town hall, and a previous editor knew who was up in court as, before the court proceedings began, they gathered across the road for a brew in the café.

If you've done a crime and you're in the paper, take it on the chin. We didn't make you break the law. This is particularly true if you're a young man caught drink driving — they seem to take exception to their cases being covered. The best was a youth who complained we had "infringed my intellectual property rights" by reporting his court case. Young man: you could have killed someone. Young men are unlikely to read this but drug driving cases are getting more common. If you have a young man in the house, please tell him not to smoke weed and drive. Whether cannabis should be illegal is a different debate but driving after smoking it is another. The police are now cracking down on drug drivers — there's at least one a week, and your son may well be caught, lose his licence and get his name in the paper.

ADDRESSES: we get more complaints about addresses in court cases than anything else. One man was so annoyed he prompted us to put up posters in our office saying that threats against staff would not be tolerated. He did have a point — the man giving his address in court had nothing to do with him — he just directed his anger at the wrong people. We can only report addresses that are given in court, and people in court are generally not there for being honest. If an address is wrong, contact us politely and we will look into it. We will make an effort to correct wrong addresses, and we try to use common sense — if a person accused of domestic violence gives that address and is then barred from approaching that property, it is clearly no longer their address.

HEADLINES: These are now covered by IPSO's complaints procedure, so if a story is correct but the headline is wrong, IPSO will uphold a complaint. As should be made clear by this column, however, we do not hide from our mistakes.

We recently reported that a man was convicted of drink driving, and the headline read that he "was nearly four times over the legal limit". In the story it was made clear that he had an alcohol reading of 91mgms in 100mls of blood, just over the legal limit of 80mgms.

It is easy to confuse readings in blood and breath — the limit for blood is numerically twice that for breath (35mcgms v 80mgms) but where four times came from we have no idea.

We won't name the man but apologies once again for the error, and for any distress caused to him and his family.

The same man also complained we said he had driven away after hitting a fence, when in fact his car was wrecked and he walked home. In our defence, the charge is "failing to stop," which implies leaving in a car, but apologies for that wrongful assumption on our part.

As we say, headlines such as that are covered by IPSO but a complaint to that body would have only resulted in the same correction in the same place in the paper.

CLANGERS: we are only human and sometimes our reporters make mistakes, bad as they may be. Our Biddulph reporter moved a plot of land from Gillow Heath to Biddulph Moor and no-one spotted it before we went to press. Plenty of people spotted it afterwards.

Our Sandbach reporter mangled a report about Sandbach Town Council and Sandbach Allotment Society, saying the council had cut all formal and financial ties with the society, when in fact it had appointed a representative to liaise with the society's Executive Committee and given it a grant.

What can we say? Sometimes we make mistakes that leave us holding our collective heads in our hands. We don't work as hard as we do to make stupid mistakes.

Apologies to everyone annoyed by those silly mistakes.

We have changed our production process to give us more time to check stories, though clearly a reporter's misunderstanding of a situation will not be spotted.

SENSITIVE MISTAKES: the worst mistakes are the ones where people already have enough on their plates without us making it worse. We reported that a young girl had cerebral palsy when in fact she had cystic fibrosis. We re-ran the story in a corrected form, and apologise once again for any distress this error might have caused.

In a tribute to a well-known local bandsman we also got the name of his best friend and pallbearer wrong. Again, we apologise for this rather upsetting error.

We guess mistakes like these are when reporters misread their notes, seeing CF for cystic fibrosis as CP for cerebral palsy etc.

FACTUAL ERRORS: we try our best but sometimes we just get confused. It is easy to make mistakes with both names and numbers, so we said Robert Shaw had been burning rubbish at Mow Lane, Gillow Heath, when we meant another Mr Shaw. Robert Shaw had nothing to do with this and an earlier incident, and we apologise to him once again.

We also reported on a fundraising ball at Cranage Hall, and stated that more than 140 people attended the event when it was 250, and said money was going to Clatterbridge and Alder Hey hospitals when in fact it was to be split between Clatterbridge Cancer Charity and consultant paediatric neurosurgeon Conor Malucci's charity, the Neurosurgical Fund.

Similarly, in a report about Biddulph Film Club, we said that sometimes the club did not know which film it would be showing until two days before the event, when it should have said two weeks.

Just as there are many a slip twixt cup and lip, there's many a slip twixt notepad and screen.

Apologies for that error, too.

Wikipedia reports that the origin of the old saying is thus: a soothsayer had predicted that Ancaeus, one of the Argonauts, would die before he tasted another drop of his wine. The Argonaut called the soothsayer and toasted him, for he had survived his journey. As he finished his toast, the Argonaut raised a cup filled with wine to his lips but was called away to hunt a wild boar before he could take a sip, and was killed hunting the boar.

Similarly, writing up notes from notebooks: while trying to transcribe a sentence, a reporter might take two telephone calls and go to speak to someone in our reception.

TECHNOLOGY INTERCEDES: we scan in some typed copy to save time, and this sometimes causes errors: we scanned in rector the Rev Jeff Cuttall's email address as gobbledygook, something we should have spotted but didn't. Apologies, Dr Cuttall.

SIGNS OF OLD AGE: finally, we carried a report of a display of angels at Congleton United Reformed Church, and there was a mix-up over feet and inches. We said the angels were seven inches tall when in fact they were seven feet. Just as a batch of reporters quite recently had never of the Hacienda and Factory Records, so the old abbreviations for feet and inches apparently baffled them, and 7' became 7". Apologies to the church. Metrication, who needs it?

As we say, we have no problem correcting mistakes. Call us on 01260 27373 to complain or email chronicleseries@aol.com in the first instance, or email chronboardroom@aol.com if you think we have made a serious mistake.

Press watchdog IPSO is at ipso.co.uk and the Editors' Code of Practice is on that website, too.

Reporting the courts: it's part of civic society

We've had a rash of complaints about court cases recently so we thought it worth a reminder of what we can print, and why we do it.

We could couch it all in legal and moral terms but what it really boils down to is this: if you can't stick to the rules and behave like an arse, the state — and the people — want you to pay a price.

If you've just been a bit of an arse, you'll get a slap on the wrist and some embarrassment. If you've been a menace and an arse, you get some heavier legal stuff thrown at you, and the embarrassment. If you're an unpleasant (or even deeply unpleasant) arse, you'll get in more trouble and embarrassment ceases to be a factor. As well as embarrassment, there's a deterrent factor and, today, reassurance for people that criminals do get arrested.

It goes back to the stocks and the pillories. Back in the day, if you stole your neighbour's chicken — and he didn't just give you a good hiding — you were fastened into a device that allowed public humiliation, and so everyone knew what you had done.

Friends might come round and be nice, others might throw vegetables at you. (Thank goodness for the invention of newspapers and mass literacy).

But that's pretty much how reporting the courts works now: the Press is given access to the courts so that you, the public, know who has done what, and that they have been punished for it. It serves as a warning and a deterrent, and there is clearly an element of naming and shaming. Justice is in the open.

The first thing to remember is that court reporting is not like tax evasion, which is how many people see it.

With taxes, the Government creates statutory controls and then smart accountants work out how they can exploit loopholes.

Court reporting is not like this. We do not, as we are sometimes accused, print what we can "get away with". As inferred at the start of this column, the law around court reporting has been specifically created to allow newspapers (and other media) to report what goes on. This is because for centuries, it's been thought important that people who break the law have the spotlight turned on them.

There's also the other side: "No freeman shall be taken or imprisoned, or be disseized of his Freehold, or Liberties, or free Customs, or be outlawed, or exiled, or any other wise destroyed; nor will We not pass upon him, nor condemn him, but by lawful judgment of his Peers, or by the Law of the land".

The State can't secretly lock people up, and anyone being threatening with the clink has the right of a fair hearing in front of their peers.

To allow all this to be in public, we are given the right to report the evidence in prosecutions, and protection from people who could otherwise sue: in normal news stories you are not allowed to say what someone is a thief or a pervert, or thumped his wife, at least not without hard evidence.

We are limited as to what we can report. We can only report what was said in open court, and before someone has admitted an offence or been found guilty, we can only report the bare facts of the case — their name and address, the charges etc.

This is to make sure any trial is fair, and potential jurors have not read detrimental material. When you hear something is sub judice, this is what it means.

We have to be accurate. We are given legal protection as long as we report accurately what is presented to open court. By the same token, we can only report what goes before the court.

Accuracy extends to addresses, possibly the one thing we get most complaints about. If a defendant gives an address to the court, that is the address we print.

It might be wrong — people are not in court for being upright citizens, after all — but it is the address we must use. It's not often people actually lie, but they may give an address without asking permission first.

At the Chronicle we print the full address. Some newspapers choose not to, but they are wrong. There may be more than one (say) John Smith on a long road, and by printing the full address, we identify the correct John Smith. Obviously if your name is Marmaduke Montgomery Braithwaite-Smythe, there'll only be one of you in the whole town, but we can't arbitrarily decide whose name is likely to cause confusion and whose is not. That's not fair.

It's not true that we sell extra copies or sensationalise court reports. In truth, ploughing through all the court lists is a dull and tedious job, because, in being fair, we have to report every court case. We don't cherry pick.

Covering the courts is also costly: we send a reporter to court every day (many newspapers no longer do so) and have to pay someone to trudge through hundreds of pages of court listings every week.

We're not saying it's easy. You may be deeply embarrassed at your crime, and many victims of domestic abuse are deeply shamed at the case going to court. You may be livid if a friend gives your address in court, particularly if they are vague about what they have been charged with.

The point is: covering the courts is something we have a duty to do. They're a lot of work and often tedious, but it is part of living in an organised civic state that criminals are identified, and that the legal system is transparent.

We have little latitude in how we report the courts: usually a complainant's beef is with the defendant or with the criminal justice itself. We are not unsympathetic but the law controls what we can do.

We will do our best to address any complaints, but we are just the messenger.